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France

Biotechnology

Are French Media Turning Pro-Biotech?

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Report Highlights:

In October, the French TV Channel Arte broadcasted a program in favor of agri-biotechnology. It countered anti-biotech activist José Bové's arguments one by one with explanations of French scientists in both public and private sectors. Bové's public demonstration of test plot destruction and his influence on the public opinion were condemned by the TV program broadcast. In November, the most widely read weekly agricultural magazine published a five-page article on three U.S. farmers growing biotech soybeans and corn. The article concluded by pointing out the economic and other benefits of "Roundup Ready" soybeans and Bt corn.

Includes PSD changes: No

Includes Trade Matrix: No

Unscheduled Report

Paris [FR1], FR

Over the past few months, French media have had positive reports on the biotech issue. On October 8, the French TV channel Arte had a two-hour prime time program on biotechnology, which basically contradicted José Bové's arguments against the new technology, through interviews of French scientists. This was followed by a November 1 issue of the French weekly agricultural magazine "La France Agricole," which published a five-page report on U.S. farmers growing biotech corn and soybeans in the Mid West, describing the technical and economical benefits of the new technology.

1. October TV Program

A French TV program broadcasted on October 8 was based on an interview with the French anti-biotech activist, Mr. José Bové, whose statements, usually taken as such by the French media, were questioned by a number of French scientists, who convincingly argued that Bové's arguments were scientifically wrong.

The title of the program was "GMOs: was Bové wrong?" Bové has personalized the fight against biotech crops over the past few years, convincing the French public and strongly influencing policy makers. In the TV program, the journalist wondered what kind of society is France if a minority group can decide whether some research is good or bad.

More specifically, the TV program focused on biotech opponents' usual rhetoric on biotech crops: biotech crops present no benefits for farmers; their pollen can travel long distances and crosspollinate with other plants; these crops kill Monarch butterflies; they endanger human health because of their toxicity and allergenicity; and Bové's views that no open field testing is needed, and plant biotechnology is anti nature.

Scientists who countered these arguments were from Novartis, the French Institute for Agricultural Research (INRA), Limagrain (leading French and European planting seed company involved in a number of biotech research programs), Meristem Therapeutics (Limagrain's subsidiary working on biotech plants producing molecules treating cystic fibrosis). A French farmer having biotech test plots was also interviewed and said he was impatiently waiting for the authorization of new biotech species to be used in open field testing. Finally, the French Parliamentarian who organized the French citizens conference on agri-biotechnology in 1998 was invited and condemned biotech test plot destructions made by Bové.

The TV program concluded that, after having identified all the benefits of agri-biotechnology, destroying biotech test plots or crops was counter productive. The camera zoomed in Bové's destruction of a biotech rice resistant to insects produced by the French Research Center for Developing Countries (CIRAD), while such research results aimed to help poor countries solve their hunger problems.

2. November Agricultural Press Report

In the November 1 issue of "La France Agricole," the most widely read weekly agricultural magazine, there was a front cover and a five-page article on three U.S. farmers growing biotech soybeans and corn in the heartland of America. The article concluded that the large acceptance of U.S. farmers for biotech crops mainly results from the benefits of RRS, which production significantly (by 50 to 60 percent) reduces weeding costs, simplifies work, and increases the flexibility of herbicide spraying. However, "La France Agricole" reported on the limited benefits of corn borer resistant Bt corn production, which is economically viable only with a high corn borer pressure.